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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 000675

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TUAREG BANDITS ATTACK TESSALIT WHILE MALI AND
REBELS NEGOTIATE

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: A previously unknown group of Tuareg bandits calling itself the Unified Forces of Azawad (FUA) attacked the Malian gendarme base in Tessalit during the early morning hours of July 19. One Malian gendarme was wounded and three others were taken prisoner. The attack appears to have been led by Baye ag Hamdi, a former National Assembly Deputy from Tessalit and one-time member of the Tuareg rebel Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC). Several Tuareg and non-Tuareg Embassy contacts said ag Hamdi suffered from an unspecified mental ailment, however, and that the FUA was a figment of ag Hamdi's imagination. Tuaregs queried by the Embassy generally dismiss the Tessalit incident as a quixotic episode that will not adversely impact ongoing negotiations between the Malian government and Tuareg rebels in Algiers. On July 21 ADC spokesman Ahmada ag Bibi said that reports relayed by French media regarding a cease-fire agreement were incorrect and that the Tuareg delegation was having trouble convincing Ibrahim Bahanga to accept terms proposed by the Malians and Algerian mediators. End Summary.

Attack in Tessalit

2.(C) A group of Tuareg bandits attacked the Malian Gendarme base in Tessalit during the early morning hours of July 19. The attack was orchestrated by Baye ag Hamdi, a former National Assembly Deputy from Tessalit who claims to represent a previously unknown group called the Unified Forces of Azawad (FUA). One Malian gendarme was reportedly wounded and three others were captured and taken hostage. Tuareg contacts have minimized the importance of this attack - as least as far as "real" Tuareg rebels are concerned - due in large part to ag Hamdi's apparently questionable mental state. The ADC appointed ag Hamdi as its "Secretary for Communications" following its May 2006 attacks on Malian military outposts in Menaka and Kidal. After participating in the May 2006 attacks ag Hamdi suffered some kind of mental break-down while hiding with the ADC in the mountains of Tigharghar east of Kidal. According to Tuareg contacts, some of ag Hamdi's outbreaks were so severe that fellow rebels tied him up in order to restrain him. Following the signature of the Algiers Accords in July 2006 ag Hamdi's family sent him to Bamako for one year for "treatment." Ag Hamdi lost his National Assembly seat during the 2007 legislative elections. He was replaced by another ADC official, Deity ag Sidamou.

Tuareg-Mali Negotiations Continue

3.(C) On July 21 ADC spokesman Ahmada ag Bibi told several Embassy contacts in Bamako via telephone from Algiers that no agreement had been reached with the Malian government and that the ADC was having trouble convincing Ibrahim Bahanga to accept terms proposed by the Malian and Algerian governments. He said differences of opinion between the Malian and Tuareg delegations delayed the start of negotiations until Sunday, July 20. Ag Bibi downplayed the importance of ag Hamdi and the July 19 attack in Tessalit

4.(C) Since July 21, Radio France and Agence France Press have been reporting the signature of a cease-fire by the Malian and Tuareg delegations. Information supplied by ag Bibi and other well-placed Tuaregs in Bamako, however, suggest that the two sides signed nothing more than a document indicating that talks took place and would continue at an unspecified date in the near future. Several posts to the Kidal Tuareg website kidal.info.com, including a rather unusual statement by the website's moderator, also challenge the French media reports of a cease-fire agreement, stating that "the two parties negotiating in Algiers broke off without signing either a cease fire, nor an agreement allowing for the liberation of prisoners, nor an implementation plan. A verbal agreement was reached to hold a follow up meeting shortly." During a July 22 interview with Radio France, Ibrahim Bahanga's father-in-law and spokesman for the Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC) Hama ag Sid'Ahmed also said no agreement had been reached and that the two sides intended to resume direct talks "soon."

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5.(C) Comment: Tuaregs and non-Tuaregs who know ag Hamdi seem to regard the FUA as a figment of ag Hamdi's imagination and the attack in Tessalit as an ill-timed but relatively unimportant incident. However quixotic, the attack and subsequent capture of three gendarmes raises the number of Malian military members now in Tuareg hands to close to 90 individuals. Liberation of the soldiers held by the ADC and Ibrahim Bahanga is a major aspect of current negotiations in Algiers. The addition of three new hostages held by a third and apparently erratic entity - ag Hamdi - signifies a step in the wrong direction. Although accurate information is difficult to come by in Bamako, our Tuareg contacts are adamant that the reports broadcast by French media regarding the signature of a cease-fire agreement are at best premature and at worst unfounded.

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